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ABSTRACT

Effective school restructuring requires teacher motivation and action to transform knowledge about change into reality. This paper defines and describes what is meant by "professional learning community"; describes what happens when a school staff studies, works, plans, and takes action collectively on behalf of increased learning for students; and discusses what is known about creating such communities of professionals in schools. The literature indicates that professional learning communities produce positive outcomes for both staff and students. For staff, being part of a professional learning community reduces teacher isolation, increases commitment to the mission and goals of the school, creates shared responsibility for the total development of students, creates powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice, and enhances understanding of course content and teacher roles. Other benefits include higher satisfaction and morale and reduced absenteeism. To develop a community of learners, pull interested, willing people together; engage them in constructing a shared vision; develop trust and relationships; and nurture a program of continuous learning. A review of a synthesis of five case studies (Louis and Kruse 1995) identifies factors of good leadership and elements of effective external support. The final section describes additional approaches that may lead to the invention of professional learning communities. (Contains 84 references.) (LMI)

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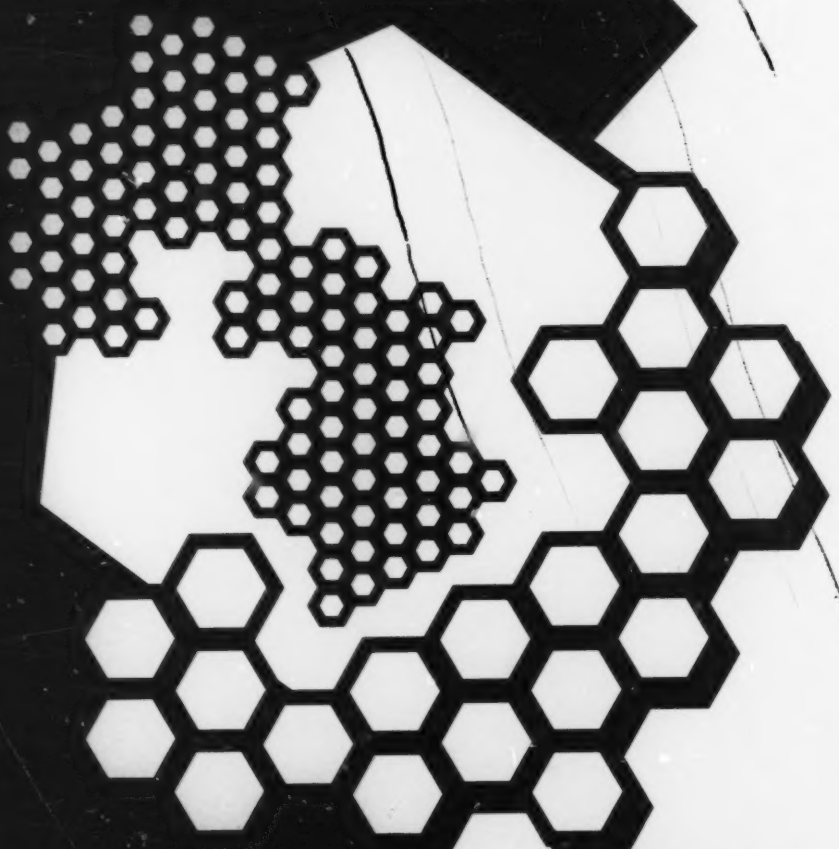
Professional Learning Communities:

Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement



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Professional Learning Communities:

Communities

of

Continuous Inquiry and Improvement

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1997

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Table of Contents

Preface iv
Introduction 1
The Learning Community Evolves 3
Attributes of Professional Learning Communities 6
- Supportive and Shared Leadership 6
- Collective Creativity 10
- Shared Values and Vision 12
- Supportive Conditions 13
  - Physical Conditions 14
  - People Capacities 15
- Shared Personal Practice 16
- In Summary 18

Outcomes of Professional Learning Communities for Students and Staffs 19
- Linkage of Staff and Student Results 20
- In Summary 27

Processes for Developing Learning Communities 29
- Senge's Suggestions 29
- Reinventing a School: A Case History 30
  - The Vision 31
  - Relationships 31
  - Empowerment 32
  - Academic Focus 32
- A Synthesis of Five Case Studies: Lessons Learned 34
  - Campus-Based Leadership 34
    - Leadership at the center 34
    - Teacher's classroom support 35
    - A vision of professional community 36
    - A culture of high intellectual quality 37
    - The management of conflict 38
    - An inclusive community 39
  - Support Beyond the School 40
    - School-based management support 40
    - Effective school leadership 41
    - Information and assistance 42
    - Community attention to teachers' needs 42
- Other Suggestions and Ideas 43
  - Boundary Reduction 43
  - Study Groups 44
  - Action Research 44
  - Staff Development as an Entry Point 45
  - Organizational Capacity 46
  - Rituals 48
  - Behaviors 48
- In Summary 49

Developing Other Learning Community Configurations 50
In Conclusion 52
References 55

Preface

Over the past several decades, both the public and education professionals have been vocal in their demands for new programs and practices in education. Simultaneously, these advocates have acknowledged that educators must come to an intimate understanding of the process of change in order for implementation to be successful and for the promises of new practices to be realized. During this period, an abundance of improvement processes were introduced to school practitioners in the hope that change would become less uncertain.

For example, the effective schools research and its related school improvement process provided the foundation for many schools around the globe to think about and work on school change. Subsequently, many other models and programs designed to improve student performance were highly touted and marketed.

Because the literature on successful school change proclaimed the importance of the principal, the role and the actions of the principal in behalf of school improvement were widely studied and reported. Despite the time and resources devoted to the study of and attention to many other aspects of change in education, disappointment in the amount and extent of educational improvement has been widespread.

A quick-fix mentality, especially prevalent in U.S. culture, resulted in many schools being poorly prepared for their plans for change and therefore implementing change in a superficial and less-than-high-quality way. This approach might be called the "microwave oven" theory of school improvement: Pop a new program in for four minutes with a hero principal to manage it and improvement is done. What then?

Throughout my years of involvement in the school improvement process — as a participating faculty member in schools that sought increased benefits for students; as a student of school change and improvement, researching the factors that affect change; and as an external facilitator, supporting schools'

efforts for improvement — I have seen many examples of unsuccessful change. Thus I began to wonder if there wasn't a better way to do things. During this time, I had the opportunity to work in a "learning organization" that matched Peter Senge's descriptions of such an organizational arrangement (1990). In that environment I experienced a nurturing culture that encouraged a high level of staff collaboration in the effort to understand successful change processes.

Subsequently, during a decade of valuable and productive research and development work at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), I was privileged to study the improvement efforts of a school whose staff operated as a professional learning community. The school's working conditions paralleled my earlier experience with a learning organization. The results of the SEDL study revealed a new model of school culture and organization that actively supported educational change and improvement.

Those experiences stimulated my thinking about organizations that value change as a means of realizing increased effectiveness. In their research on improving the urban high school, Miles and Louis (Louis & Miles, 1990; Miles & Louis, 1990) cite "the will and the skill" for change. Much knowledge has been accrued regarding the skills necessary for change; what is not so clear is how to obtain the will — the motivation, the interest, the action — to do something with the knowledge that is available.

It seemed to me that if we could better understand the phenomenon of producing change-ready schools (those that *value* change and *seek* changes that will improve their schools), we could develop a more effective strategy for pursuing continuous school improvement. Jeannie Oakes, from her studies of school context, maintains: "There is evidence that a 'professional' staff will work toward implementing strategies and programs to improve results" (1989, p. 194).

With encouragement about such school-based professional structures, and with the need for increased understanding of these structures, this literature review was initiated. The review seeks (1) to define and describe what the literature is calling the professional learning community; (2) to describe what

happens when a school staff studies, works, plans, and takes action collectively in behalf of increased learning for students; and (3) to reveal what is known about how to create such communities of professionals in schools.

Though not exhaustive, the review includes stories and reports of research, most of which are not available in their original form but are reported by the researchers in books and articles in popular educational journals. These sources are reasonably accessible to educational practitioners at all levels of the system: state departments of education, institutions of higher education, intermediate service agencies, district offices, and local campuses. It is this audience for whom the review is intended — in the hope that this information will challenge and inspire all of us to make our schools more effective environments for both student and staff learners.

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Professional Learning Communities:

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of

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Introduction

The term *learning community* is becoming well integrated into the lexicon of American education. Some educators see it as extending classroom practice into the community, utilizing community resources, both material and human. For others, it suggests bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students. For still others, it means having students, teachers, and administrators reciprocally engaged in learning.

Astuto, et al. (1993) proposed three related communities: (1) the professional community of educators, (2) learning communities of teachers and students (and among students) both within and outside the classroom, and (3) the stakeholder community. This paper focuses on what Astuto and colleagues labeled the *professional community of learners*, in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit; thus, this arrangement may also be termed *communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*.

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Through a review of the literature, this paper will explore the concept and operationalization of professional learning communities:

What do professional learning communities look like and how do they function?

Why are such learning communities important for both staff and students?

How are learning communities introduced and developed in schools as a new organizational arrangement?

The reader should be aware that the literature selected for this report consists primarily of items that focus on building learning communities of entire school staffs or whole high school departments. MacMullen, in a review and analysis of factors influencing Coalition of Essential Schools reform (1996), concluded that a significant requirement for impact is the inclusion of the *whole* faculty (emphasis added): in developing the vision, understanding the mission and purpose for which they are engaging, and deciding how to carry out their reform plans. Similarly, in their article "Learning From School Restructuring," Peterson, McCarthey, and Elmore (1996) found that successful school restructuring involved teachers' meeting together as a whole staff or in teams.

a significant requirement for impact is the inclusion of the *whole* faculty

A focus on the system or the group as a whole does not, however, mean that the individual should be ignored, for, as Hall and Hord (1987) emphasized, organizations do not change — individuals do. Fullan agreed that it is the individual who provides the most effective route for accomplishing systemic change (1993); individuals change systems, acting separately and together (1994).

organizations do not change — individuals do

The Learning Community Evolves

In both the private corporate world and the public education sector, attention in the eighties began to focus on the influence of work settings on workers. Rosenholtz (1989) brought teacher workplace factors into the discussion of teaching quality, maintaining that teachers who felt *supported* in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice were more committed and effective than those who did not. Support by means of teacher networks, cooperation among colleagues, and expanded professional roles increased teacher efficacy for meeting students' needs. Further, Rosenholtz found that teachers with a strong sense of their own efficacy were more likely to adopt new classroom behaviors and that a strong sense of efficacy encouraged teachers to stay in the profession. In a similar vein, Fullan (1991) focused on the teacher workplace and recommended a "redesign [of] the workplace so that innovation and improvement are built into the daily activities of teachers" (p. 353).

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McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) confirmed Rosenholtz's findings, suggesting that when experienced teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry and its related learning, the result was a body of wisdom about teaching that could be widely shared. Adding to the discussion, Darling-Hammond (1996) cited shared decision making as a factor related to curriculum reform and the transformation of teaching roles in some schools. In such schools structured time was provided for teachers to work

shared decision making as a factor related to curriculum reform and the transformation of teaching roles in some schools

together in planning instruction, observing each other's classrooms, and sharing feedback.

Darling-Hammond observed that such teacher workplaces were "embryonic and scattered" (1996, p. 10) but added that attention to redesigning the way teachers spend their time and to rethinking teacher responsibilities is greater now than at any time in the past. McGreal, responding to a question about getting beyond individualism and isolation from other adults (in Brandt, 1996) also observed that he sees more collaboration and more collegial conversation among school staff than ever before. Further, he judged that "schools are getting better — a lot better" (p. 33) as a result.

The private sector has devoted considerable attention to the workplace and its culture. Deal and Kennedy (1982) reported how business and private industry managers used cultural factors to bring about change with staff. And, parallel with the educational researchers noted above, organizational theorists working in corporate America have espoused similar ideas about workplace factors. The work of Senge (1990), Block (1993), Galagan (1994), Whyte (1994), and others emphasizes the importance of nurturing and celebrating the work of each individual staff person and of supporting the collective engagement of staff in such activities as shared vision development, problem identification, learning, and problem resolution. In the business sector, this way of operating has been labeled *learning organization.*

the importance of nurturing and celebrating the work of each individual staff person and of supporting the collective engagement of staff

The business literature has reinforced the schooling literature as educators have investigated the methods by which corporations operate and the ways business managers and staff interact to stay on top of customer demands. Currently, the educational consumer is making demands ever more long and strong. "Schools are now expected not only to offer education, but to ensure learning" (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 5), and high-quality learning at that.

Darling-Hammond reminded us that in the past, educators selected the right textbook and curriculum programs to bring about improvement. These programs were "teacher-proofed" with abundant prescriptions for what teachers should do. Although much study and investment was given to the change process and how to put programs into practice in classrooms, too frequently only rhetorical attention was given to this process.

The result was short-term schoolwide change efforts that lacked the full participation of school staff. Nurturing staff's willingness to change so that improvement is continuous has been an ongoing challenge to would-be leaders of school change.

Thus, new initiatives are looking to a new strategy — professional learning communities — for adopting and implementing potentially powerful programs and practices for students. Teachers will need to engage in schoolwide collegial activities and in joint professional

engage in schoolwide collegial activities and in joint professional efforts that have children's learning as their purpose

efforts that have children's learning as their purpose (Jalongo, 1991). This strategy involves investing in teacher preparation and professional development, as well as permitting greater autonomy and decision making for teachers. What might this look like in a school?

Attributes of Professional Learning Communities

The literature on educational leadership and school change recognizes clearly the role and influence of the campus administrator (the principal, and sometimes an assistant principal) on whether or not change will occur in the school. It seems clear that transforming the school organization into a learning community can be done only with the leaders' sanction and active nurturing of the entire staff's development as a community. Thus, a look at the principal of a school whose staff is a professional learning community seems a good starting point for describing what these learning communities look like and how they operate.

Supportive and Shared Leadership

One could reasonably ask, If the staff of a school are working together and making decisions about its programs and processes, what is the staff's relationship to the campus principal? Lucianne Carmichael, first resident principal of the Harvard University Principal Center and a principal who nurtured a professional

community of learners in her own school, suggested an interesting angle on this issue.

Carmichael (1982) discussed the authority and power position held by the principal in which the principal is viewed as all-wise and all-competent by the staff on the lower rungs of the power-structure ladder. This "omnicompetence" has been internalized by principals and reinforced by others in the school, making it difficult for principals to admit to any need for professional development themselves or to recognize the dynamic potential of staff contributions to decision making. Furthermore, it is difficult for staff to propose divergent views or ideas about the school's effectiveness when the principal is seen in such a dominant position.

Carmichael proposed that the notion of principal omnicompetence be "ditched" in favor of principals' participation in professional development. Kleine-Kracht (1993) suggested that administrators, along with teachers, must be learners: "questioning, investigating, and seeking solutions" (p. 393) for school improvement. The traditional pattern that "teachers teach, students learn, and administrators manage is completely altered. . . . [There is] no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone else, but rather the need for everyone to contribute" (p. 393).

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in the school, where all grow professionally and learn to view themselves as "all playing on the same team and working toward the same goal: a better school" (Hoerr, 1996, p. 381). Leithwood and colleagues' studies (1997) reinforced these values where principals treated teachers with respect and as professionals, and worked with them as peers and colleagues.

leadership of principals as one of the necessary human resources for school-based professional communities

Louis and Kruse (1995) identified the supportive leadership of principals as one of the necessary human resources for school-based professional communities referring to them as "post-heroic leaders who do not view themselves as the architects of school effectiveness" (p. 234). Prestine (1993) defined three factors required of principals in schools that attempted essential school restructuring: the ability to share authority, the ability to facilitate the work of staff, and the ability to participate without dominating.

A principal in a school where the staff demonstrated a collaborative relationship in a well-instituted professional community shared reflections:

> The two principals who preceded me had a real commitment to share decision making and move teachers toward ownership in what was going on in the school, so when I came it was clearly understood when I interviewed for the position that was the way we did business. . . . If you are not intimidated by that, then you put your faith in

> people you work with . . . and get a great deal accomplished (Boyd & Hord, 1994a, pp. 19-20).

The studies of Leithwood, et al. (1997) made clear that leadership contributes "significantly to school conditions fostering OL [Organizational Learning] processes" (p. 24). A school whose staff is learning together and participating in decisions about its operation requires a campus administrator who can let go of power and his/her own sense of omnipotence and omnicompetence and thereby share the leadership of the school. As Sergiovanni explained, "The sources of authority for leadership are embedded in shared ideas" (1994b, p. 214). Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, and Snyder (1996) asserted that it is also important that the principal believe that teachers have the capacity to respond to the needs of students, that this belief "provides moral strength for principals to meet difficult political and educational challenges along the way" (p. 19). Senge (quoted by O'Neil, 1995) added that the principal's job is to create an environment where the staff can learn continuously "[t]hen in turn, . . . the job of the superintendent is to find principals and support principals who have that attitude" (p. 21).

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An additional dimension, then, is a chief executive of the school district who supports and encourages continuous learning among its professionals. This suggests that no longer can leaders be thought of as top-down agents of change or seen as the visionaries of the corporation; leaders must be envisioned as democratic

a chief executive of the school district who supports and encourages continuous learning among its professionals

teachers. Sergiovanni suggested how this may be done (1994a, p. xix):

> [Leaders] plant the seeds of community, nurture fledgling community, and protect the community once it emerges. They lead by following. They lead by serving. They lead by inviting others to share in the burdens of leadership.

Collective Creativity

In 1990, Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* arrived in bookstores and began popping up in the boardrooms of corporate America. Over the next year or so, Senge's book and its description of *learning organizations* that might serve to increase organizational capacity and creativity moved into the educational environment. The idea of a learning organization "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3) caught the attention of educators struggling to plan and implement reform in the nation's schools. As Senge's paradigm shift was explored by educators and shared in educational journals, the label became *learning communities*.

In schools, the learning community is exemplified when people from multiple constituencies at all levels

collaboratively and continually work together (Louis & Kruse, 1995), "enhancing their capacity to create things they really want to create" (Senge, in O'Neil, 1995, p 20). Such collaborative work is grounded in what Newmann (reported by Brandt, 1995) and Louis and Kruse labeled reflective dialogue, in which staff conduct conversations about students and teaching and learning, identifying related issues and problems. Griffin (cited by Sergiovanni, 1994a, p. 154) referred to these activities as *inquiry* and

reflective dialogue, in which staff conduct conversations about students and teaching and learning, identifying related issues and problems

> believes that as principals and teachers inquire together they create community. Inquiry helps them to overcome chasms caused by various specializations of grade level and subject matter. Inquiry forces debate among teachers about what is important. Inquiry promotes understanding and appreciation for the work of others. . . . And inquiry helps principals and teachers create the ties that bind them together as a special group and that bind them to a shared set of ideas. Inquiry, in other words, helps principals and teachers become a community of learners.

Participants in such conversations learn to apply new ideas and information to problem solving. Key tools in this process are shared vision; supportive physical, temporal, and social conditions; and a shared personal practice. We will look at each in turn.

Shared Values and Vision

staff are encouraged not only to be involved in the process of developing a shared vision, but to use that vision as a guidepost in decision making about teaching and learning in the school

"Vision is a trite term these days, and at various times it refers to mission, purpose, goals, objectives, or a sheet of paper posted near the principal's office" (Isaacson & Bamburg, 1992, p. 42). Sharing vision is not just agreeing with a good idea; it is a particular mental image of what is important to an individual and to an organization. Staff are encouraged not only to be involved in the process of developing a shared vision, but to use that vision as a guidepost in decision making about teaching and learning in the school (ibid.).

a core characteristic of the professional community is an undeviating focus on student learning

A core characteristic of the professional community is an undeviating focus on student learning, maintained Louis and Kruse (1995). Students are pictured as academically capable, and staff envision learning environments to support and realize each student's potential achievement. These shared values and visions lead to binding norms of behavior that the staff shares.

In such a community the individual staff member is responsible for his/her actions, but the common good is placed on a par with personal ambition. The relationships of the individuals are described as caring. Such caring is supported by open communication, and trust makes this possible (Fawcett, 1996). Newmann (in Brandt, 1995) maintained that the concern of the adults in the school for the "intellectual quality of student learning, in contrast to concern for techniques, such as

whether to have portfolios or whether to eliminate all ability grouping" (p. 73) makes the difference in the values and visions that the staff bring to teaching and learning.

Newmann explained that the degree to which the staff develops into a professional community that engages and develops the commitment and talents of all individuals into a group effort that "pushes for learning of high intellectual quality" is the key to student success. Newmann shows a link between student learning of high intellectual quality and school professional communities that achieve the same degree of academic excellence. Martel (1993) concisely defines the vision of the professional learning community as a focus on "the quality of life, quality of work, quality of learning — in short, a total quality focus" (p. 24).

Supportive Conditions

Supportive conditions determine *when* and *where* and *how* the staff regularly comes together as a unit to do the learning, decision making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community. Two types of conditions are necessary for learning communities to function productively: the physical or structural setup and the human qualities/capacities of the people involved (Boyd, 1992; Louis & Kruse, 1995).

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Physical Conditions

Louis and Kruse identified the following physical factors that support learning communities: time to meet and talk, small size of the school and physical proximity of the staff to one another, teaching roles that are interdependent, communication structures, school autonomy, and teacher empowerment. An additional factor is the staff's ability to select teachers and administrators for the school, with the possibility of encouraging staff who are not in tune with the program to find work elsewhere.

Boyd's list of physical factors in a context conducive to school change and improvement is similar: the availability of resources; schedules and structures that reduce isolation; policies that provide greater autonomy, foster collaboration, provide effective communication, and provide for staff development.

Time is a resource and "time, or more properly lack of it, is one of the most difficult problems faced by schools and districts" (Watts & Castle, 1993, p. 306). This problem is a significant issue for faculties that wish to work together collegially, and it has been cited as both a barrier (when it is not available) and a supportive factor (when it is present) by staffs engaging in school improvement. Donahoe (1993) maintained that formally rearranging the use of time in schools so that staff are supported in their interactions is a prime issue to be

formally rearranging the use of time in schools so that staff are supported in their interactions is a prime issue to be resolved by restructuring schools

resolved by restructuring schools. Raywid (1993) also addressed the need for supplying meaningful time for staff to engage in the work of learning and acting in behalf of improvement for students. All these authors suggested practical ways to solve the time dilemma.

People Capacities

One of the first characteristics of individuals cited by Louis and Kruse (1995) in a productive learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement. In addition, the following characteristics are needed: respect and trust among colleagues at the school and district level, possession of an appropriate cognitive and skill base that enables effective teaching and learning, supportive leadership from administrators and others in key roles, and relatively intensive socialization processes.

willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement

Note the strong parallel with people or human factors identified by Boyd (1992): positive teacher attitudes toward schooling, students, and change; students' heightened interest and engagement with learning (this may be construed as both an outcome and an input, it seems); norms of continuous critical inquiry and continuous improvement; widely shared vision or sense of purpose; norm of involvement in decision making; collegial relationships among teachers; positive, caring student-teacher-administrator relationships; a sense of community in the school; and two factors beyond the

school staff — supportive community attitudes; and parents and community members as partners and allies.

physical and people factors are highly interactive, many influencing the others

Boyd (1992) pointed out that the physical and people factors are highly interactive, many influencing the others. Boyd and Hord (1994a) clustered the factors into four functions that help build a context conducive to change and improvement: reducing staff isolation, increasing staff capacity, providing a caring and productive environment, and improving the quality of the school's programs for students.

Shared Personal Practice

In order to identify and describe the attributes of professional learning communities, we can sort them in a variety of ways. Thus, sharing personal classroom practice might sensibly be included among conditions that support the community. However, this practice, attribute, or component (or whatever other label one might wish to use), seems significant enough to warrant individual attention.

review of a teacher's behavior by colleagues is the norm in the professional learning community

Review of a teacher's behavior by colleagues is the norm in the professional learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995). This practice is not evaluative but is part of the "peers helping peers" process. Such review is conducted regularly by teachers who visit each other's classrooms to observe, script notes, and discuss observations with each other. The process is based on the

desire for individual and community improvement and is enabled by the mutual respect and trustworthiness of staff members.

based on the desire for individual and community improvement and is enabled by the mutual respect and trustworthiness of staff members

Wignall (1992) described a high school in which teachers share their practice and enjoy a high level of collaboration in their daily work life. Mutual respect and understanding are the fundamental requirements for this kind of workplace culture. Teachers find help, support, and trust as a result of the development of warm relationships with each other. "Teachers tolerate (even encourage) debate, discussion and disagreement. They are comfortable sharing both their successes and their failures. They praise and recognize one another's triumphs, and offer empathy and support for each other's troubles" (p. 18). One of the conditions that supports this culture is the involvement of the teachers in interviewing, selecting, and hiring new teachers. They feel a commitment to their selections and to ensuring the effectiveness of the entire staff.

A goal of reform is to provide appropriate learning environments for students. Teachers, too, need "an environment that values and supports hard work, the acceptance of challenging tasks, risk taking, and the promotion of growth" (Midgley & Wood, 1993, p. 252). Sharing their personal practice contributes to creating such a setting.

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In Summary

Reports in the literature are quite clear about what academically successful professional learning communities look like and act like. The requirements necessary for organizational arrangements that produce such outcomes include:

- the collegial and facilitative participation of the principal who shares leadership — and thus, power and authority — through inviting staff input in decision making
- a shared vision that is developed from an unswerving commitment on the part of staff to students' learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced for the staff's work
- collective learning among staff and application of the learning to solutions that address students' needs
- the visitation and review of each teacher's classroom behavior by peers as a feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement
- physical conditions and human capacities that support such an operation.

A paradigm shift is needed, however, both in the public and in teachers themselves about what the role of teacher entails. Many in the public and in the profession believe that the only legitimate use of a teacher's time is standing

in front of the class, working directly with students. In studies comparing how teachers around the globe spend their time, it is clear that in countries such as Japan, teachers teach fewer classes, using a greater portion of their time in planning, conferring with colleagues, working with students individually, visiting other classrooms, and engaging in other professional development activities (Darling-Hammond, 1994, 1996). Changing perspectives to enable the public and the profession to understand and value teacher professional development will require focused and concerted effort.

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Outcomes of Professional Learning Communities for Students and Staffs

"Our view is, by the way, that if you can't make a school a great professional place for its staff, it's never going to be a great place for kids" (Brandt, 1992, p. 21, quoting Hank Levin). Such factors, indicators, or variables that are supportive of the growth, development, and self-esteem of students are exactly those that are critical to gaining the same outcomes for a school's staff (Sarason, 1990). These authors suggested that the tight coupling of staff and students results in an environment where staff are communally organized. A review of staff and student outcomes that have been reported in the literature is the focus of this section.

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Linkage of Staff and Student Results

Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995), in a report on one of the extensive restructuring studies conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (see Newmann, above), shared findings on 11,000 students enrolled in 820 secondary schools across the nation. In the schools that were characterized by professional learning communities, the staff had worked together and changed their classroom pedagogy. As a result, they engaged students in high intellectual learning tasks, and students achieved greater academic gains in math, science, history and reading than students in traditionally organized schools. In addition, the achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds were smaller in these schools, students learned more, and, in the smaller high schools, learning was distributed more equitably.

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The schools in the study were communally organized and promoted a setting in which staff (and students) were committed to the mission of the school and worked together to strengthen that mission. Staff members saw themselves as responsible for the total development of the students and shared a collective responsibility for the success of students. In such schools, "teachers and other staff members experience more satisfaction and higher morale, while students drop out less often and cut fewer classes. And both staff and students post lower rates of absenteeism" (p. 5).

staff members saw themselves as responsible for the total development of the students and shared a collective responsibility for the success of students

Lieberman (1995a) recommended teacher learning contexts that include the support of colleagues in a professional community that is nurtured and developed not only within but outside the school. In *The Work of Restructuring Schools* (1995b) Lieberman reported that providing ways for teachers to talk publicly with each other about their work in behalf of students reduces the isolation of teachers and -mobilizes them to commit themselves to making major changes in how they participate in the school.

In commenting on the case studies of schools in *The Work of Restructuring Schools,* Darling-Hammond (1995) observed that the schools that initiated school improvement efforts by looking into teaching and learning, and discussing how the practices were effective for students showed academic results more quickly than schools that did not. She insisted that teachers need to have opportunities to share what they know, to consult with peers about problems of teaching and learning, and to observe peers teaching. Darling-Hammond noted that such activities in professional learning communities deepens teachers' professional understanding (1993).

Bryk, et al. (1994) concurred that schools with strong democratic practices and expanded local participation are more likely to undertake fundamental, systemic change. They advised helping schools to become professional learning communities in order to provide learning environments for *adults* as well as students, so that the full potential of reform may be reached.

schools with strong democratic practices and expanded local participation are more likely to undertake fundamental, systemic change

A powerful form of teacher learning comes from membership in professional communities that extend beyond classrooms and school campuses (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Wood, 1995). Such communities engage individuals in collective work and bring them into contact with other people and possibilities. These settings provide opportunities for teachers to reflect critically on their practice, thus creating new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning.

Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) advised against pressuring individual teachers to develop new skills but rather recommended building communities of teacher/learners. Gary Sykes (1996) agreed that "an invaluable resource for teachers is a professional community that can serve as a source of insight and wisdom about problems of practice" (p. 466).

Teachers need opportunities for colleagues — someone other than the campus administrator — to observe them in trying new practices and to provide nonevaluative feedback. This helps them to understand the subjects they teach and the facilitating roles they play in the school. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993), from their longitudinal study of sixteen high schools in California and Michigan, reported that teachers' groups and professional communities "offer the most effective unit of intervention and powerful opportunity for reform" (p. 18)

and that "participation in a professional community . . . supports the risk-taking and struggle entailed in transforming practice" (p. 15).

participation in a professional community . . . supports the risk-taking and struggle entailed in transforming practice

In a professional community, teachers can consider educational goals and their meaning in terms of their classrooms, their students, and their subject area. Teachers who made effective teaching adaptations for their students belonged to a professional community that encouraged and supported them in transforming their teaching. Through discussion with other teachers and administrators in the professional community, teachers' ideas of good teaching and classroom practice were defined (McLaughlin & Talbert).

Ernest Boyer's research (1995) concluded that the most essential factor in a successful school is that of *connection*; the most successful learning occurs when teachers teach effectively in their own classrooms but also find solutions *together*. In such schools, teachers operate as team members, with shared goals and time routinely designated for professional collaboration. Under these conditions, teachers are more likely to be consistently well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired so that they inspire students.

teachers are more likely to be consistently well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired so that they inspire students

The work of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) comprises four complementary studies including rigorous

three- and four-year longitudinal case study approaches, as well as survey methods and collection of student test data. Data cover 1,500 elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States, with field research in 44 schools in 16 states. This paper makes specific reference to the studies reported by Lee, Smith, and Croninger; Bryk, et al.; Louis and Kruse; and Newmann and Wehlage. It seems appropriate to report briefly the conclusions generated by the results of all four of the studies (Lynn, 1995-96).

The results showed that comprehensive redesign of schools, including decentralization, shared decision making, schools within schools, teacher teaming, and/or professional communities of staff, can improve student learning. Four interconnected factors leading to improved student outcomes were identified.

1. Student learning. Teachers agree on a vision of authentic (in agreement with real-world experience or actuality, not contrived) and high-quality intellectual work for students that includes intellectually challenging learning tasks and clear goals for high-quality learning. This vision is communicated to students and parents.

2. Authentic pedagogy. High-quality student learning is achieved in classrooms through authentic pedagogy (instruction and assessment), and students of all social backgrounds benefit equally, regardless of race, gender, or family income.

3. Organizational capacity. In order to provide learning of a high intellectual quality, the capacity of the staff to work well as a unit must be developed. The most successful schools functioned as professional communities, where teachers helped one another, took collective (not just individual) responsibility for student learning, and worked continuously to improve their teaching practices. Schools with strong professional communities offered more authentic pedagogy and were more effective in encouraging student achievement.

where teachers helped one another, took collective (not just individual) responsibility for student learning, and worked continuously to improve their teaching practices

4. External support. Schools need essential financial, technical, and political support from districts, state and federal agencies, reform projects, parents, and other citizens.

Similar key features of successful school-based reform studied by Quellmalz, Shields, and Knapp and reported in *School-Based Reform: Lessons from a National Study* (1995) include

- challenging learning experiences for all students
- a school culture that nurtures staff collaboration and participation in decision making
- meaningful opportunities for professional growth (section 2, pages not numbered)

The collection of research studies cited in this review clearly identifies the power of the organized professional learning community that makes possible the advancement of student achievement. Through the

learning community, teachers learn "how to translate enhanced curricula and higher standards into teaching and learning for all of their students" (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993, p. 5). It is, however, not simply the presence of the learning community but what the community chooses to focus on that influences the outcome. McLaughlin (1993) reminded us of this when she cautioned that professional communities, in and of themselves, are not necessarily a good thing. Values and beliefs shared by a group of individuals can be misplaced and may not support appropriate efforts to respond to the needs of students.

not simply the presence of the learning community but what the community chooses to focus on that influences the outcome

Staff learning communities could significantly respond to the issues raised by Alexander, Murphy, and Woods (1996), who contended that the "revolving door" of educational innovations, "the reason why educational innovations come and go with such regularity" (p. 31), may be attributable to two factors. The first is that education, like most human endeavor, focuses on doing what we know how to do. There is a comfort level involved, and the challenge of learning new practice (affected so significantly by time and other constraints in schools) prevents a rich understanding of the innovations, often leading to superficial implementation.

A second explanation is that implementors do not have "an extensive knowledge of the literatures or research that underlie these innovations, resulting in the

reinvention or recycling of old movements under new labels" (p. 31). There is, of course, no certainty that organizing staffs into learning communities will eliminate these problems. But it seems quite plausible that the opportunities provided by regular meetings of learning communities, their inquiry into innovative solutions to student learning, and the thoughtful examination of new programs and practices could result in the kind of understanding and learning addressed by Alexander and colleagues.

In Summary

The reports shared above indicate that outcomes for both staff and students have been improved by organizing professional learning communities. For staff, the results include:

outcomes for both staff and students have been improved by organizing professional learning communities

- reduction of isolation of teachers
- increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school and increased vigor in working to strengthen the mission
- shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success
- powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice, that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners
- increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles that they play in helping all students achieve expectations

- higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students
- more satisfaction and higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism
- significant advances into making teaching adaptations for students, and changes for learners made more quickly than in traditional schools
- commitment to making significant and lasting changes
- higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental, systemic change.

For students, the results include:

- decreased dropout rate and fewer classes "cut"
- lower rates of absenteeism
- increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools
- larger academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools
- smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds.

If professional learning communities can be a significant force for empowering staff that leads to school change and improvement and increased student outcomes, how can such communities be developed in schools? The next section addresses this question.

Processes for Developing Learning Communities

Peter Senge was asked (O'Neil, 1995) what he would do, if he were a principal of a school, to transform the school into a learning organization.

Senge's Suggestions

Senge replied that initially he would find the teachers who were interested in doing things differently, who have "some real commitment and passion to do it," and get them to talking to each other. Pulling a core group together is a strategy frequently used for mobilizing and moving people in an organization. Starting with the "starters" is practical, Senge added, but at the same time, planning how to include others is very important also. Simultaneously, Senge would initiate an ongoing visioning process based on reflection in a safe environment where people can share what they really care about.

pulling a core group together is a strategy frequently used for mobilizing and moving people in an organization

Before change can be planned and implemented, a school must decide what it stands for and where it is going (Ashby, Maki & Cunningham-Morris, 1996). As personal visions are communicated, individuals begin to develop a shared vision, grounded in trust and mutual understanding. And an organization must not only develop and communicate its vision but consider the *use* of its vision, making decisions consistent with the vision as "evidence of the organization's commitment to its role and to itself" (Garmston & Wellman, 1995).

nothing in schools or other organizations will change unless individuals' beliefs, ways of seeing the world, skills, and capabilities are given an environment conducive to change

Senge concludes by noting that nothing in schools or other organizations will change unless individuals' beliefs, ways of seeing the world, skills, and capabilities are given an environment conducive to change. O'Neil's interview with Senge is more philosophical than pragmatic; the reader will need to consult other sources for implementation guidelines.

Reinventing a School: A Case History

Boyd and Hord (1994b) describe how a succession of principals and their staff changed the paradigm of a school that was destined to be closed because of declining enrollment. The school organization benefited by the input of the various principals, who emphasized different areas. The school's survival through what might have been a destabilizing situation — the progression of several principals — gives special hope to others. The story of this school illustrates that professional learning communities were under development before corporate culture took up the refrain in 1982.

it may be that the presence of a crisis is a real key to gaining attention and action for change

It may be that the presence of a crisis is a real key to gaining attention and action for change. This school's crisis was followed by the assignment of a new principal who brought a mission for the school that focused on respecting, celebrating, and building on the characteristics and the native abilities of the children.

The Vision

The focus on the children and shaping the school to fit them and their needs was enhanced by a vision that included attention to staff who would share broadly in making decisions for the school and who would be supported by continuous staff development to ensure wise decision making. The principal advocated a "person-centered" approach for staff management because, she said, "teachers can't honor children until they have been honored themselves" (p. 2). Teachers were interviewed to ascertain if they were interested in the "new" school or if they would prefer to transfer.

focus on the children and shaping the school to fit them and their needs

Teacher development became a priority, and all available resources were channeled in that direction. Teachers visited other schools, read articles and books, attended conferences, and shared their experiences through regular discussion at Faculty Study, a weekly two-hour block of time that had been obtained by restructuring the weekly school schedule. In this way the staff were nurtured, and a shared vision began to develop.

regular discussion at Faculty Study, a weekly two-hour block of time that had been obtained by restructuring the weekly school schedule

Relationships

A second principal who rapidly succeeded the first (who had been provided on short-term loan from her full-time job as principal in another school) helped teachers to identify problems of learners, which they then studied and resolved, focusing on the *cognitive dimensions* of the staff's job. But he also pulled them together in

helped teachers to identify problems of learners, which they then studied and resolved

recreational ways for further bonding. Sometime it was an impromptu after-school staff volleyball game in the gym, or an end-of-the-week visit to a local restaurant to celebrate the week's accomplishments, or a potluck supper with staff's families attending. These activities were instrumental in helping the staff build an atmosphere of trust and caring relationships.

Empowerment

A third principal's goal was enabling the staff, students, and parents to participate more fully and to contribute their emerging expertise to the good of the whole school. She developed several systems for circulating logistical information, both within the school and to parents and the community-at-large, so that such announcements would not take up valuable time at staff meetings. To make teachers feel valued, she encouraged special events that recognized teachers and their talents. She supported teachers who were writing proposals for obtaining program grants; she streamlined administrative procedures and organized a management team so that teachers could have an effective, hands-on voice in decisions.

to participate more fully and to contribute their emerging expertise to the good of the whole school added a renewed emphasis on students' learning tasks

Academic Focus

With the arrival of the computer age came yet another principal, whose specialization and professional preparation were in the area of curriculum. To the professional learning community that the staff had

created he added a renewed emphasis on students' learning tasks, with computer technology as an instructional tool and a curriculum designed to foster multiculturalism. For nearly an entire school year, the staff read about, studied, and discussed the curriculum, brought in current users, and attended a conference that focused on it. Their thorough knowledge of its purpose and philosophy, not to mention its content, provided the basis for informed decision making about adopting and implementing the curriculum.

During this period of development, staff learned how to give constructive feedback to each other and resolve group conflicts. Peer mediation, a program that develops skills for students in resolving conflict, was also implemented at this time.

staff learned how to give constructive feedback to each other and resolve group conflicts

In this elementary school, the steps or factors in developing a community of learners were very similar to Senge's ideas: pull interested, willing people together, engage them in constructing a shared vision, develop trust and relationships, and nurture a program of continuous learning. This staff learning community exemplified the deep study and analysis of new programs recommended by Alexander, Murphy, and Woods (1996) and lamented as typically lacking in school change efforts. More detail about what was done to develop the school professional learning community may be found in several papers (Boyd & Hord, 1994a; Boyd & Hord, 1994b; Hord & Boyd, 1995).

learning community exemplified the deep study and analysis of new programs

A Synthesis of Five Case Studies: Lessons Learned

From a set of studies conducted by collaborating researchers, Louis and Kruse (1995) synthesized and reported the learnings from five urban schools studied. They characterized the learnings as "Getting There: Promoting Professional Community in Urban Schools" (pp. 208-227). These authors organized the learnings from the multi-year studies into two groups: those related to principals and/or other campus-based leaders and those significant to persons providing leadership outside the school.

Campus-Based Leadership

In linking the school leadership role to the development of professional community, Louis and Kruse identified six issues.

Leadership at the center. In three of the schools that were more successfully developing community, the school leaders clearly positioned themselves in the center of the staff rather than at the top. For instance, in one school, two directors who provided leadership located their desks in the communal teachers' room, rather than in a separate office. In another school, in the absence of the principal, a school-based coordinator for the school improvement project operated from the center. She put her office in a central location, making it easier to invite teachers to gather for professional conversation —

school leaders clearly positioned themselves in the center of the staff rather than at the top

informal events dedicated to discussion about learning. In this way, she downplayed her role as coordinator and emphasized her role as supporter and provider of assistance.

In contrast, the leadership team at one of the less successful schools expressed their "superior status" in various ways, with isolated offices, and sole determination of agendas for meetings that they conducted. They consistently reminded teachers that they had the responsibility for making decisions about a variety of issues. In yet another school, the principal provided no leadership and did not support anyone else in the role, assuming that teachers somehow would take charge.

To summarize, leading from the center requires *being* at the center — a physical presence, with *accessibility* the key. Second, leading from the center means giving up some of the expected leadership behaviors (such as being authoritative, or always running the meetings) in favor of sharing such behaviors with others. And third, individuals who lead at the center take advantage of every opportunity to stimulate conversation about teaching and learning, to bind faculty around issues of students and instruction.

Teacher's classroom support. It is clear that instructional leadership is a requirement of a developing community of professionals in which "increased cognitive understanding of instruction and learning and a more

sophisticated repertoire of teaching skills" are goals (pp. 212-213). In the more successfully developing schools, there were persons available to provide support to individual teachers. And, in one of the schools, individual teachers' problems with teaching and learning were brought before the whole group of teachers for discussion and problem solving. This strategy enhanced the individual teacher's growth in teaching competency and reinforced the community's responsibility for teaching and for each other.

there were persons available to provide support to individual teachers

In the less successful schools, leaders failed to give attention to teachers' needs for improving classroom skills. In these schools, even when the physical arrangement of the facility encouraged teacher visitation and interaction, teachers rarely took advantage of such possibilities.

leaders need to assist teachers in improving their classroom performance

The main issues here are that leaders need to assist teachers in improving their classroom performance; leaders can look to others, either inside or outside the physical building, but the leader must be certain that help is available. And in order for teachers to feel okay about asking or receiving assistance individually, a climate in which instruction is viewed as problematic must exist.

A vision of professional community. Leaders model the behaviors of a professional community, keeping the vision of such a workplace culture alive and visible. As Louis and Kruse observe, "a democracy is more than a

form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living through communicated experience" (p. 215) and a professional community is founded on a "process of communicating ideas, ideals, shared concerns, and interests" (p. 216). Thus, the autocratic leader who holds all the power, who is dominating, and who makes all decisions will not likely model participatory behaviors related to democratic practice.

The democratic professional community allows dissent and debate among its members, and this can result in increased understanding and learning of the members. Tradition and "the way we do it here" are challenged and discussed as a means to new insights and practices. The leaders' vision of a democratically grounded community of professionals was an important factor in the development of the successful schools' communities of professional learners.

democratic professional community allows dissent and debate among its members

A culture of high intellectual quality. Acquiring and applying new knowledge is an intellectual task and a high priority in a professional learning community. Leaders in the most successful schools actively supported a culture of inquiry through constant scanning and bringing in of new ideas and people to help teachers reflect on their teaching practice and to develop increased skills. Leaders championed the need for information and data so that staff engaged in discussions of "What is working and how do we know?" (p. 219). The leaders also supported and promoted action research by teachers as a

supported a culture of inquiry through constant scanning and bringing in of new ideas and people to help teachers reflect on their teaching practice and to develop increased skills

means by which teachers consumed and generated new knowledge.

Teachers need continuous interaction to assimilate significant ideas, as well as support for examining and identifying new practices that can increase their effectiveness. For this to happen, leaders must take personal action to make connections to research and promising practice outside the school or provide the external means for doing so.

a reflective organization is one in which the members question its activities and challenge its value – such reflection almost certainly leads to conflict

The management of conflict. A reflective organization is one in which the members question its activities and challenge its values. Such reflection almost certainly leads to conflict. Principals can address this conflict by providing an environment in which teachers resolve their dissension through discussion and debate. In essence, this means persistently addressing disagreements through a series of opportunities, provided by the principal, for continuous discussion and exploration.

Frequently such discussion results in an accommodation of differences among individuals and a sense of arriving at a solution that everyone can live with, even if all are not wholeheartedly in favor of it. Such discussion, made possible by the principal, allows individuals to rethink their decisions and actions. Addressing conflict is in direct opposition to the traditional posture of ignoring or avoiding conflict.

Effective leaders manage conflict by providing a safe forum for discussion, reinforcing the values of the community, and being willing to live with uncertainty and ambiguity as the participants work through the issues involved.

An inclusive community. As Senge noted above, one way to begin developing a learning organization, or a learning community, is to start with those ready to start — but, he cautioned, it is imperative to include all the staff of a school, and that is the hard part. Louis and Kruse warned that unless the initiative extends beyond the enthusiasts, the "community will remain, at best, fragmented" (p. 222).

unless the initiative extends beyond the enthusiasts, the community will remain, at best, fragmented

At one of the schools reported by Louis and Kruse, an external stimulus kept a core set of issues on the agenda for cross-team discussion, providing the opportunity for schoolwide professional community development. At another school the principal was particularly sensitive to including all staff and systematically identified issues that required the attention of all teams of teachers. The principal at a third school praised individual teachers who were improving their practice but neglected to reinforce and applaud teachers' collective efforts — not an inclusive approach.

Leaders in the study schools typically did not realize the necessity of creating opportunities that would pull all of the faculty together in pursuit of a common objective or

necessity of creating opportunities that would pull all of the faculty together in pursuit of a common objective or goal

goal. The message for leaders is that they must provide foresight and personal involvement in nurturing the expansion process. One key, as mentioned, is fashioning meaningful ways for teachers to come together to focus on issues and work that concerns all of them.

Support Beyond the School

In addition to the actions suggested for campus-based leaders in promoting schoolwide professional communities, Louis and Kruse examined additional data beyond their cases and made inferences about actions that should be taken by others outside the school to promote community development.

district policies and actions frequently distract schools from the localized work that they are expected to do

School-based management support. Although a majority of states have mandated site-based decision making, or school-based management, district policies and actions frequently distract schools from the localized work that they are expected to do. For example, districts sometimes create facilities that do not nurture community development among teachers that the school is targeting. District textbook selections that are out of sync with a school faculty's identification of students' needs is another example of a highly centralized district structure that can wreak havoc with a local campus's efforts to focus on local needs in a decentralized way.

In larger districts teachers complain that because of the size of the territory, district level policy and decision

makers do not understand them and their situation, and thus get in the way. On the other hand, a school in a large district can remain "hidden" with its independent activities if the district staff provides no attention to them. The school in the first case study illustrated such a situation for some years, until the arrival of a new superintendent who increasingly centralized decision making, and thereby interrupted the school's long-standing history of community study and site-based decision making.

What this seems to say is that some two-way understanding and accommodation on the part of schools and the external governance and control systems at the district and state levels are necessary. If schools are to operate as thoughtful communities of professionals who address the unique problems of their own schools and simultaneously operate within the district and state context, some basic agreements must be reached.

Effective school leadership. A key factor in the reports of all the case studies examined in this section is the role of campus-based leadership. This is not a new factor in school change efforts but is an essential one. For the past two decades principals and other school leaders have been the focus of research and leadership development. Rather like the disappointing results of attention given to school change noted at the beginning of this review, however, what has been learned about school leadership has not resulted in significantly more effective school leadership.

a key factor in the reports of all the case studies examined in this section is the role of campus-based leadership

Given the recurring focus on the role of school leadership and the continuous reconfirmation of its significance, perhaps the most important task of district- and state-level school improvers is to target this issue, regardless of whether the goal is the development of professional learning communities.

perhaps the most important task of district- and state-level school improvers is to target this issue

Information and assistance. Urban schools are particularly hard pressed to access resources that can be important means of support. Because their budgets are "lean," schools that are not well funded must depend upon inventive and resourceful principals — the garage sale junkies, as some have called them. These creative administrators find resources, both material and human, to support their school's efforts for improvement. Another resource that such school leaders can find is time. It would seem important for districts to discover dramatic new ways to address the problems of resources and support for schools and their leaders.

because their budgets are lean, schools that are not well funded must depend upon inventive and resourceful principals

Community attention to teachers' needs. There is a real need for community voices — school board, district office staff, local politicians — to direct their attention not only to the needs of students and learning but to the needs of teachers as well. The frequent contest of these voices for power and control distracts from the focus required for improving the educational opportunities for students in schools. Louis and Kruse called for more consistent intellectual leadership from the top level of the system.

to direct their attention not only to the needs of students and learning but to the needs of teachers as well

Other Suggestions and Ideas

As illustrated by this review of the literature, there is little information to provide guidance in creating and developing professional learning communities. The two sections of this review that report case studies of schools are noteworthy in their response to this need.

While none of the literature provides an explicit step-by-step set of directions or procedures for creating professional learning communities (and simplistic, recipe-type prescriptions would not be appropriate), the literature does reveal some additional approaches that may lead to the invention of such communities. These suggestions follow in the hope that they will initiate or stimulate alternative ideas that may be useful or that at least may forestall unproductive approaches.

Boundary Reduction

In one secondary school, the principal addressed issues of the physical plant, allocation of office space, hiring and promotion, and shared decision making to reduce the boundaries between high school departments. These factors contributed to the creation of a collaborative environment in which teachers appeared to be more confident in their abilities to face challenges and less threatened by the prospects of change (Wignall, 1992). These elements resonate with the Boyd and Hord (1994a) factors of reducing isolation, developing staff capacity, providing a caring and productive environment, and promoting increased quality.

physical plant, allocation of office space, hiring and promotion, and shared decision making to reduce the boundaries between high school departments

Study Groups

individuals read a book or selections of text and meet to discuss the implications and applications of the material for their particular setting

One means by which to lead staff into a collective learning experience is through study groups (Marsick & Watkins, 1994; Murphy, 1991). Individuals read a book or selections of text and meet to discuss the implications and applications of the material for their particular setting. Teacher networks and study groups offer the possibility of long-term collaboration focused on instructional practice that can influence teachers' views of their roles and work (Floden, Goertz, & O'Day, 1995). Marsick and Watkins suggested other entry points for developing learning communities: action-reflection learning — planning for action, taking action, and then reflecting on its outcomes; working on real problems; or tackling flaws in the organization. The idea is to build a culture that helps people to gain new knowledge that can make a difference in their work.

Action Research

engages teachers in looking at what is happening in a school, determining if teachers can make it a better place

Calhoun (1994) encouraged the use of action research to develop learning communities. Action research, in essence, engages teachers in looking at what is happening in a school, determining if teachers can make it a better place by changing curriculum and instruction and the relationships of the staff with students, assessing the results, and continuing the cycle. To do this requires rearranging the ways that people in the school relate to one another, by acquiring new skills in order to change and learning to be effective problem solvers for the school.

Calhoun identified the necessary conditions for action research to be supported: a staff committed to a better educational program for all students; an articulated agreement about how decisions will be made by the staff together; a team of facilitators who will support and guide the staff in the action research process; groups (small groups or all staff in the school) that meet regularly; an understanding of how action research works; and technical assistance. Calhoun's book on this topic is worth further exploration.

Staff Development as an Entry Point

Corcoran (1995) maintained that the typical formats for staff development are most often a waste of time because they lack a clear focus and effective follow-up and they are not part of a more long-range scheme of learning for teachers. As Floden, Goertz, and O'Day (1995) note, it takes more than a workshop to truly develop teachers' new abilities. "Because workshops alone seldom alter dispositions and views of self, reform efforts that hope to build capacity must use a wide range of strategies" (p. 20). Floden and colleagues pointed out that an essential component in the implementation of these strategies is time for discussion, observation, and reflection (activities of learning communities).

takes more than a workshop to truly develop teachers' new abilities

Teachers' attitudes toward change and commitment to student learning are key ingredients in achieving reform (O'Day, Goertz, & Floden, 1995). These researchers found

that teacher attitudes and abilities are shaped and reinforced not through the traditional model of staff development but in the contexts in which they work and learn, including the communities formed by their relationships with other professionals. In these communities, individuals or groups of individuals bring in new ideas for examination and discussion with their colleagues. This structure provides the forum and the support for collective learning (professional development). The support, noted the authors, is ongoing and focused on improving student achievement.

Organizational Capacity

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) concluded that schools with strong organizational capacity begin with a well-defined school mission. Add to that the authority for the school to hire staff with views that are consistent with the articulated mission, and then provide leaders who keep the school on track. Garmston and Wellman (1995) reported that developing such collective capacity in an organization requires a setting in which increasingly high-performing individuals strive for mastery and improvement, knowing they can always expand their effectiveness. In such an environment, leaders

a setting in which increasingly high-performing individuals strive for mastery and improvement, knowing they can always expand their effectiveness

- initiate and manage adaptivity so that the organization changes and improves while maintaining its core identity

- develop and support vision, values, and focus goals so there is congruence in the heads and hearts of everyone in the effort
- develop and nurture interdependence in order to draw strength from each individual and to provide opportunity for cooperation
- develop and apply systems thinking, looking for patterns and relationships within and outside the system, allowing more creative responses to appear
- interpret and apply data, leading the entire organization's membership in the activity
- gather and focus resources (pp. 10-11).

This map provided by Garmston and Wellman will require the uninitiated leader to gain the resources and skills needed to develop these capacities in a school. Thus, again, more explicit experiences, studies, and stories are needed to provide suggestions about how to accomplish these things. It is worth noting that Garmston and Wellman described strong-capacity schools as "collaborative places where adults care about one another, share common goals and values, and have the skills and knowledge to plan together, solve problems together, and fight passionately but gracefully for ideas to improve instruction" (p. 12). This characterization is consistent across the reports on schools that operate as professional learning communities.

Rituals

how Asians foster community and nourish spirit

Mentioned earlier in this paper was Deal and Kennedy's (1982) work on describing the culture in corporate America and the use of stories, rituals, and traditions to maintain that culture. Hallinger, et al. (1996) addressed the role of ritual in building communities of learners. They explored how Asians foster community and nourish spirit; they indicated that North Americans can learn from Asian staff developers about the creation of learning communities through the use of rituals — leaving the reader to identify, develop, and share such rituals.

Behaviors

belief is most likely to follow behavior rather than to precede it

Robert Lindberg (1995) asked us to remember that although belief must underlie a permanent change in human behavior, belief is most likely to follow behavior rather than to precede it; therefore getting individuals to take action or to behave in certain ways is a more efficient starting point than trying to change beliefs so that behavior will follow. Thomas Guskey (1986), in his staff development model, suggested the same strategy — pushing teachers into using a new behavior and directing their observation to its positive effects on students, thus encouraging the teacher to adopt more behaviors and new beliefs.

In Summary

The reader may have noticed the rather prominent role of the principal in the suggestions noted in this paper for initiating and developing professional learning communities. This may seem at odds with the concept of community, which strongly urges the involvement and active participation of the staff. As noted earlier, the principal's role is a significant factor in any change effort. Louis and Kruse (1995) reminded us that "it is clear that principals or other designated leaders continue to be best positioned to help guide faculty toward new forms of effective schooling" (p. 209). Thus strong actions by the principal on behalf of community development are necessary, it appears, to "get the ball rolling" and, once the initiative is under way, it is also necessary for the principal to share leadership, power, authority, and decision making with the staff in a democratically participatory way.

strong actions by the principal on behalf of community development are necessary

There are, however, little clear information and few models to guide the creation of professional learning communities. Although much discussion, theorizing, and reporting on the subject has taken place in the business sector, such experiences may or may not translate well to public schools. In the educational arena, writers have lamented the lack of research-based procedures that contribute to the formulation and establishment of professional learning communities. It may be that this

organizational arrangement is yet too new or too infrequent in schools to have a history and a base of empirical research. This strongly suggests a need for studies that address the question.

Developing Other Learning Community Configurations

In addition to the literature that promotes whole-staff involvement, there is other literature that addresses the professional learning community whose membership is not the entire staff of a school or the whole secondary school department.

stretches across a number of schools where individuals learn from and support each other in order to increase their effectiveness for students

One sort of community stretches across a number of schools where individuals learn from and support each other in order to increase their effectiveness for students. An excellent example is found in a report by Wood (1995) that described how mathematics teachers from several districts in New Mexico engaged in community learning activities to improve mathematics teaching and student mathematics achievement. Spears and Oliver presented a paper at the 1996 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association that focused on a community of learners where collaborative learning structures were developed among a regional college, the state department of education, and a cluster of rural schools.

Peterson and Brietzke (1994) described collegial and collaborative cultures that "require both time and structured opportunities for joint work" (p. 10). Similarly, Reitzug and Burrello (1995) described how a continuous school improvement culture can be developed among independent individuals; and Guskey and Peterson (1996) gave direction to creating learning communities in smaller units, such as the school improvement council.

In a unique setting, a learning community was established among representatives of six of the nation's ten regional educational laboratories funded by the Department of Education. Laboratory staff have been meeting regularly for six years to study school restructuring efforts. The members have contributed information and skills development to each other, sharing their expertise and encouragement. They not only learn with and from each other, but they have posed the hard questions about how they have gone about their work and why and have explored how to improve their effectiveness. Consequently, the work has shifted in focus and operation, with multiple collaboratively developed products as a result, the most recent a book on student voices in school reform (Restructuring Collaborative Laboratory Network, 1997).

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Finally, though, the citations in this review that focus on whole-staff professional learning communities are both reinforcing in their reported results and divergent in the

information provided. The study and understanding of learning communities and their creation is, however, essentially in its infancy. Much is yet to be known. One immediate need is research that would seek more descriptive examples of how professional learning communities function and how contextual variables influence what they look like and what they do. As noted, a target for study should focus on the factors needed for consideration in creating such organizational arrangements: what the conditions are and who does what, including the school's neighborhood community and the public at large. Creating professional learning communities in the nation's schools is a primary goal. The current paucity of information about the process is frustrating for would-be creators of such communities. But, it reminds us again of the complexity of the change process and of the myriad factors that affect human endeavor and behavior.

target for study should focus on the factors needed for consideration in creating such organizational arrangements

In Conclusion

This review and synthesis of the literature on learning communities represents the work of highly reputed educational researchers in the fields of teaching and learning, and school change processes. Through defining characteristics and operational procedures, these researchers have helped us to understand more about these communities. Further, the research is clear about the significant outcomes for both staff and students that result from professional organization arrangements such as these. Admittedly, what the researchers have not given us is guidance about initiating and developing such

structures — a necessary next step.

Nonetheless, the mandate from these writers is to move forward. Emily Calhoun (1994) argued that "the results of our study make us intolerant of the status quo that allows the loss of a million students a year, with disenfranchisement from the opportunities our society offers" (p. 3). In a large way, there is a sufficient knowledge base to guide the appropriate and effective learning experiences of all students. Encouraging educators to take the necessary action to learn how to build on their strengths has been problematic. However, a bright spot is provided by the number of reports in the literature that focus on collaborative learning activities and the concept of learning communities being designed and implemented in various teacher and administrator preparation programs in higher education (Gamson, 1994; Avila et al., 1995; Matthews, 1995).

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Sergiovanni (1996) maintained that classrooms must become communities of learning, caring, and inquiring. For this to happen, the school must become a place where teachers are involved in a community of learning, caring, and inquiring. "Key to community in both classrooms and schools is a commitment to inquiry, and a commitment to learning as the basis for decisions" (p. 147). "If our aim is to help students become lifelong learners by cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the capacity for inquiry, then we must provide the same conditions for teachers" (p. 152). Educator preparation programs can help to bring about these conditions.

As mentioned in the introduction to this literature review, many approaches have been offered in the hope that school staffs will gain sufficient knowledge and skills to provide the effective learning experiences that all students need in order to become successful learners. The message of this review seems abundantly clear: Professional learning communities can increase staff capacity to serve students, but success depends on what the staff do in their collective efforts. Peterson and colleagues (1996) caution that "while school structures can provide opportunities for learning new practices, the structures, by themselves, do not cause the learning to occur" (p. 119).

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Whether schools organized in this way are labeled learning organizations, learning communities, professional learning communities, professional schools, problem-solving schools, or communities of continuous inquiry and improvement, it is important to keep in mind that

> what is now envisioned is a quantum leap toward the creation of a setting where inquiry is normal and the conditions of the workplace support continuous, collegial inquiry . . . that involves the total faculty, builds community, serves to increase student learning through the study of instruction and curriculum, and seeks to provide a nurturant organization through collective study of the health of the school (Joyce & Calhoun, 1995, p. 51).

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